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CROSSING BORDERS: MIGRATION IN AN ALBANIAN FRONTIER ZONE

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Introduction

Looking at international borders with the tools of ethnographic observation allows us to understand general phenomena that appear in a particular light in a border context. This is particularly true in the Balkans where most international borders date back to the beginning of the 20th century only and are seen as unsatisfactory by all the states. Emigration is one of these questions as it is obviously connected to the crossing of borders. Moreover, the end of the Cold War saw the resurgence of migration in this area, after an interruption of several decades. Albania alone offers a great variety of situations, starting with the highly conflictual border with Serbia. Notwithstanding the territorial issue of Northern Epirus, the southern border is dominated by the question of Albanian emigration to Greece, which started as early as 1991, and has become a major problem between the two states, as most of this emigration is illegal. In the border area itself however emigration is not only a question of crossing the border, as it has to do with the very existence of local communities which have to deal with both states. This chapter looks at the way Albanian emigration, both in practice and discourse, is shaped by the vicinity of an international border.

Devoll is a small district of south eastern Albania, on the Greek border and close to the Macedonian border. It has approximately 43 000 inhabitants (1998) and had been for a long time a part of the larger district of Korçë when it gained its “independence” in 1992 by becoming a district (*rreth*) by itself. It is mostly rural and the population — except one

Macedonian village — is all Albanian, though divided in two religious communities, Muslim and Orthodox Christian.

The profits generated by the border post of Kapshticë — known as Kristalopigi on the Greek side — played a great part in the decision of separating the Devoll from Korçë, as people from Devoll are now privileged in getting jobs and bribes at the border post. Kapshticë is one of the two main crossing points between Albania and Greece, the other being Kakavijë, in Epirus. Compared to the latter, the border post of Kapshticë looks less busy and somehow quieter. No gate of any kind has to keep the Albanian crowd inside Albania, as is the case in Kakavijë, and the lorries are usually less numerous. Kapshticë remains nonetheless the gateway to north eastern Greece, including the large urban centre of Thessaloniki and the agricultural regions of Macedonia and Thessalia, all very attractive to the Albanian workers. Devoll is thus at the same time a crossing point for migrants and one of the places where Greek army and police bring back the clandestines they have caught in Greece.

Life on the border

The town of Bilisht (8 000 inhabitants), Devoll's administrative centre, is obviously turned towards the border. At any time of the year, and even more between March and October, the town is used as a gathering place by many would-be migrants from most of Albania. Special bus lines wait for the travellers at the Pogradec train station, 65 km away, and regular ones bring many of them from Korçë bus station — Korçë being the main urban centre of south eastern Albania. A few hotels have opened in Bilisht which hosts migrants for a few days before their departure for the borderline. But the number of rooms is still very low and most of the migrants spend the night in the outside, sleeping in parks and orchards. This is especially true in summer time, when the number of candidates becomes very high and the warm weather allows them to sleep in the outside. The situation is the same, though at a smaller scale, in the border villages, higher in the mountains, which are used as illegal crossing points, some of them being less than half an hour walk away from the border.

People waiting to cross the border are of two kinds: some of them have just arrived from their villages in northern or central Albania, others have been brought back from Greece by the Greek police or army and wait a few days before trying again.

Migrants are a source of profit for the local population. First of all, as they usually stay a few days in Bilisht before leaving, they have to eat and drink. If they generally avoid the bars and restaurants, they rely on the contrary on the small food shops and stands which have opened on the main road, and can be seen everyday on the market, buying big loaves of bread, bottles of soda, fruit and biscuits. Most of them do not have any other luggage than the food they take on their trip towards the border, and they carry it in a white bag of the kind used to store flour or dry beans. Many shopkeepers now display such bags in front of their shops, as they are sure to sell them in a very short time. The same bags

have thus come to be the “emblem” of the refugees, and anyone unknown who is seen carrying such a bag on its shoulder is always classified as “refugee”.

Second, migrants always have to change money, when they leave as well as when they come back. The number of “exchange offices” in Bilisht is excessively high compared to the needs of the local population and is only explained by the coming and going of numerous refugees. “Exchange office” is a rather pretentious word, as many of them do not have any office at all but work on the central square and the bars around, waiting for the customer in front of a coffee and a glass of *raki*. There is much cheating on their part when exchanging the refugees’ money — as many of the refugees coming from the North are not aware of the exchange rate of the Greek drachma — and there is a game going on among them, the winner being the one who earns more in one single operation with a refugee. The situation is even easier for them in the remote border villages where there is hardly no concurrence and where the refugees have to change money or starve in Greece (if the Greek drachma is usually accepted for payment on the Albanian side, this is of course not true of the Albanian lek on the Greek side).

The central square in Bilisht is also the place where many refugees look for the man who will help them in crossing the border and finding transportation once on the Greek side. These people are called “guide” (*kullauz*) but the phrase “the ones who deal with the refugees” (*ata që merren me refugjatë*) is heard more often, as this new “profession” is generally considered badly and people do not like to give it a name. The “guides” are necessary to most of the refugees as they offer services that seem a condition *sine qua non* for a successful stay in Greece: they guide them by night through the hills and mountains, know how to avoid Greek army patrols and usually work with Greek associates who drive the refugees to the very place where they want to go in Greece. These services are very expensive — many refugees have to borrow money before they leave their family in order to pay for the crossing. They then have to work between one and three months in Greece to pay back their debts, before even earning money for themselves. Most of them nonetheless believe it is worth it, since it avoids them a dangerous journey in an unknown country and allows them to work as soon as they are in Greece, without any lost of time. In the remote villages, the same man can be a shopkeeper, a guide and change money, dealing with the refugees in whatever need they have. This is for instance the case of Namik, owner of one the café-groceries in a mountain village, who never sleeps deeply between March and October, as he wants to hear any band of refugees coming to the village from either side of the border. He then runs out to meet them, houses them in his shop, leaving one of his son to watch on the goods, and offers his services. If they want to cross immediately, he calls for a young man who will guide them through the hills to the nearest Greek village, but he likes better keep them a day or two, pretending troubles on the border. He then can offer to feed them and he knows they will spend the time playing billiards — and paying for it. Everywhere in Bilisht and the border villages, people “who deal with the refugees” are looked at by the rest of the population with both envy — their pockets are full of bank notes when they come back from the border — and disgust: they do a bad job and live at the expense of people who are much poorer than they are.

The passing by of refugees is not the only way in which local life is concerned by emigration and border crossings. Local people do also go and work in Greece on a seasonal basis. This is especially true of the villages, where no work can be found apart from domestic agriculture, while the higher level of employment in Bilisht seems to prevent people from leaving. Being a commercial and administrative centre close to the border provides the town with very interesting job opportunities, and one can see Albanian workers in Greece coming back quickly to Bilisht when a place becomes vacant at the customs, where profits are even higher than in Greece. The villages on the contrary are not attractive at all and they seem to be emptied of their male population by the end of spring until September. Village men do the hard work on their lands before going to Greece, and leave their wife, old parents and children to care for the fields during the summer. According to the place they work in Greece, they can even come back to harvest and go again for a month or two. Some of them indeed are employed in the nearest Greek villages and cross the border daily. Among them, many take advantage of this situation to smuggle with the Greek villages, but this is another story.

Two kinds of migrants

According to local representations, migrants who cross the border with Greece are of two kinds: the first consists of migrants from the district itself; the second is made of migrants from other parts of Albania. There is no special name for the first category: people just refer to local migrants by saying: “they are in Greece, he works in Greece” (*janë Greqi, punon Greqi*). In contrast, migrants from other parts of the country are always referred to by the name “refugee” (*refugjat*), which is the Italian word, entered in Albania at the time of the “exodus” towards Italy at the beginning of the ‘90s. In the Devoll, it has lost its original meaning and come to mean “foreigner” or “traveller”. In other words, these Albanian migrants are called refugee even before they leave Albania.

There are many ways in which this distinction is made obvious to the migrants themselves. The two categories rarely mix together. In the town of Bilisht, as well as in the border villages which are used as meeting and departure points for crossing the borderline, refugees usually stay aside from the local population: they sleep in the fields and the woods around the villages, they do not go to the bars and shops — except to buy food for their trip — and when they play billiards, they play among themselves, never with the local villagers. The separation and absence of communication can take extreme forms, since nobody seems to be willing to have contacts: arriving one morning in a village to visit a friend, I am told by his wife that he is at work in the orchard, just in the outskirts of the village. As I arrive on the spot I find my friend Ferdinand ploughing the soil in between the apple and plum trees. Under one of the trees however lies a group of 6 to 8 refugees, most of them sleeping or looking at the sky, ignoring both Ferdinand and me. Ferdinand goes on ploughing, turning around the refugees without asking them to move in order to let him finish his work. Everything appeared as if nobody was ready to establish contact, as if Ferdinand did not want to help these men nor even learn where they were from, and as if they knew Ferdinand would be of no help to them. The relationships between the migrants

and the local population are generally of the same kind: they ignore each other as long as they do not have personal interest in dealing with each other. In Bilisht, where the refugees are many because the ones who are brought back to the border from Greece gather in town before trying again, a restaurant is named “the bar of the refugees” (*klubi i refugjatëve*) and most of its customers are indeed refugees. They nonetheless stay apart from the local customers and seem to avoid any clash with them. Moreover, like many travelling people, the refugees are considered to be a threat to the local population: villagers explain that they lock their door because of the refugees, and women confess that they do not travel alone on the roads any more, because, as one of them says, “*many people travel by, which we do not know, and we wonder who they are*”. In the border villages, mothers warn their children saying: “*be quiet, or the refugees will take you to Greece*”. In reality, because of what appears to be fear of contact with the locals, refugees bring little trouble in the area; and when they do, it has to do with their own stealing and quarrelling with each other, and not with the local population. Nevertheless, they are commonly considered as a source of insecurity.

The distinction between local migrants and others makes more sense when it is connected to the local conception of the national space of Albania. The opposition between North and South has come to be a part of common knowledge about Albania with its “ethnic” (Ghegs against Tosks) and political (anticommunist against communist) dimensions. It should nonetheless be noticed that the words “gheg” and “tosk” belong to a somehow high-educated language and are very rarely used by local populations, among which the sense of belonging and community appear at a smaller scale, usually that of the district. From the local point of view, the North-against-South opposition is rather used as a way of talking about “we” and “the others”: seen from the South, the North represents everything people of the South deny for themselves. In that meaning there is no geographical border between North and South, and the river Shkumbin, traditionally referred to as the limit between Gheg and Tosk areas, is of no importance. For the Devoll population for instance, the town of Gramsh is already associated with the North — though it is situated south of the Shkumbin — as it is considered to be a remote, backward and desolated area compared to the Devoll.

Seen from the Devoll, all refugees are “northerners” (*nga veriu*) or “mountaineers” (*malokë*). Indeed, many of them come from the centre and the north of Albania, while migrants from the south usually cross the Greek border further in the west and do not have to travel through the Devoll district. Anyway, the point to be noticed here is that in local representations, people from the north have a strong and bad reputation. This reputation includes poverty, violence and cultural backwardness. In contrast, the population of south eastern Albania is proud of its own wealth as well as of its culture — culture (*kulturë*) is to be understood here as a mixture of development and personal education. The fact that most refugees are actually poor people tends to consolidate this negative representation.

As far as emigration is concerned, the two categories are also opposed on the basis of their behaviour in Greece. People from the North are said to go there for the money, and only for the money: they are no hard workers and they tend to steal and rob if their

jobs do not please them. Local migrants on the other hand are said to be hard workers and loyal to the Greeks who give them jobs; they explain that they have too much pride and self-respect (*sedër*) to act badly towards the ones who help them. In other words, they can be trusted, while the others cannot. And, because of this self-pride, people from the Devoll tend also to pretend that they do not go that much to work in Greece, while the others, the northerners, have to go because of their extreme poverty. In the first group, the feeling of humiliation connected to emigration is said to be stronger than the actual need to work abroad, while in the second group the need is stronger than anything. The spatial opposition between North and South is thus used here as if it was expressing the feelings of the local population towards emigration: emigration is a bad thing, they say, we should not have to leave the country; so we leave it to those backward northerners. In this respect, local representations of migrants is a good example of the mirror effect of the opposition between North and South: in fact, people from the South do not differ very much from those from the North when it comes to the necessity and will to go and work in Greece, but since emigration is felt as something negative in the definition of one's identity — it means poverty, exploitation by a Greek boss, leaving one's family alone, etc. — it is projected on the Northerners alone.

Moreover, that same opposition between local and distant migrants tends to create a sense of local identity based on the familiarity with the border area. Refugees from the north always travel in bands of ten to twenty and more people, and they need the help of a local guide (*kullauz*) to cross the border safely (specially in winter time when the mountain tracks are covered with snow or disappear in the mist). In contrast, local migrants usually cross the border in small groups (up to five people), and they can rely on their personal knowledge and contacts on the other side of the border, among the Greek villagers. They were also the first ones, when the borders opened, to cross over and visit the Greek villages, before migrants from other parts of the country began to arrive. In that way, people from Devoll believe that they have special and stronger ties with the Greek population, and they sometimes feel closer to Greece than to the rest of Albania, especially when they compare themselves to the Northerners. Before the parliamentary elections of May 1996, Albanian Christians who live close to the border with Greece were sure that all the Devoll, Christians and Muslims together, would vote for the Human Rights Party, close to Greek interests in Albania, because of their links with Greece. *"Just look at them, says one, they have all been to Greece at least once, soon, they will all speak the language. The Greek claims over Northern Epirus do not bother them; they will stop being Albanian and they do not care. They think it is better to change the borderline and to live like Greeks rather than to survive like Albanians."* Later that same year, a refugee from Shkodër arrived from Greece and spent one night in the Muslim village I was staying at, one hour from the border. In the evening, as we were all at home watching television, the landlord kept playing with the remote control of the television, insisting on the wide range of Greek channels he could receive — he had never been to Greece and could not understand a word of Greek. As the landlord expected, the Shkodran was much impressed by all these Greek channels. Half smiling and pointing to the direction of the border, the landlord answered: *"Ah! Greece is just there, we are in Greece here!"* Needless to say that the same man was never the last one in the village to say how badly he

considered the Greeks — except when he had to show the rest of Albania how privileged the Devoll is.

The distinction between the local migrants and the others is not made by the Devoll population alone. On the other side of the border, the Greeks tend to operate the same distinction between local and distant migrants. The first ones are often called “our Albanians”. Most of them have been crossing the border since the beginning and they are quite well-known in the Greek villages. They are more likely to find jobs in these Greek border villages, while the others are always sent away in the cities. By calling them “our Albanians”, the Greeks do not mean they consider them as good friends or loyal workers, and they actually do not trust them very much. But, as they put it, “*at least, if one of our Albanians does something wrong, we know where to find him,*” meaning that they can easily cross the border to the Albanian villages and get back what was stolen. Nevertheless, there exists a sense of community among Greeks and Albanians in the border area, which does not exist at all with the other Albanian migrants. Very few Greeks have been to central and northern Albania — while they are much more interested in visiting Northern Epirus — and they tend to consider the population of these distant areas as dangerous murderers and Muslim fanatics. People from Bilisht pretend the Greeks never go further than Korçë because they are afraid of what could happen in more distant places where all Albanians are mafiosi and carry weapons. Altogether, the local conceptions of the Albanian migrants on both the Albanian side and the Greek side of the border are quite similar. It is difficult to say how much what the local Greeks think and say is influenced by what the local Albanians tell them about themselves, but the fact that the Greek population agrees on the same distinctive opposition is taken by the Devoll population as evidence of their own identity and superiority. The sense of community that exists between both sides of the border does not mean real knowledge of one another, as many Greeks have never been to the Albanian villages, but feel anyway a kind of proximity with Albania. “*What would like to know about Albania?*” asks a Greek villager. “*Just ask me.*” “*Have you ever been there?*” “*Oh, no! Why should I go? It is so dangerous, they can rob you of everything and leave you naked on the road.*”

The sense of local identity was given a strong emphasis in 1992, when the Devoll became a district by itself, while it had been so far a part of the district of Korçë. This decision is said to have been taken by the local population in order to “regain” its independence (the Devoll had been a separate district until 1958). The fact that the new district can keep a part of the incomes from the border post of Kapshticë probably played a role in this decision. It also gives the population the opportunity to create its own links with the neighbouring Greek districts of Florina and Kastoria. Officials from the Devoll regularly cross the border to meet their Greek counterparts and discuss common projects or take part in religious celebrations. Greek officials from the border villages recognize that they have many projects concerning the cooperation with their Albanian neighbours — at least before the events of 1997.

This situation should be compared to the former one, when the border with Greece was tightly locked and when no contact of any kind could be established across the border. The Devoll was then at the same time a peripheral area, a place where no one

should go to, and a place with strong ties with the centre of the state. As a state border area it was indeed highly watched by the army and police forces, most of which were not recruited among the local population, but came from other parts of Albania. Today the army has disappeared from the border, the policemen are mainly local people, and the Devoll seems to look towards Greece more than towards Tiranë and Korçë.

Migration and local society

Emigration is not only a journey into space, it is also a journey through time, in which Albania represents the past and Greece the future. Migrants are expected to bring a piece of that future into Albania when they come back. In this respect emigration is not only an answer to the lack of work and money, but is also an answer to the lack of modernity. Apart from this, the temporal dimension of emigration appears in two different cyclic conceptions, a long-term one, and a short-term one.

In the long-term cyclic conception, the present emigration phase is seen as the repetition of past migrations. Before World War II, a lot of people from the Devoll, especially among the Christians, left their country to go to America or Australia. This period of time is still remembered as a time of progress and innovations for the whole district. Migrants would send money home and come back after five years abroad, bringing modern clothes, modern equipment and modern mentality to their villages.

The interesting point is that this migration was mainly a Christian phenomenon and can be seen as one of the causes of the cultural superiority of Christians over Muslims in today's Devoll. It is indeed commonly assumed by local people, both Muslims and Christians, that Christians enjoy a higher level of culture: Christian villages were the first ones to open schools in the first decades of 20th century, affording their inhabitants to become civil servants, intellectuals and entrepreneurs instead of peasants. They were also more inclined to go abroad, especially to the USA, from where they used to send money back to the village. Today, Christian villages are still known in the Devoll to be better equipped than Muslim ones: they've got water adduction, paved street and large stone houses, giving them an urban character which contrasts with the very rural Muslim villages. All this, including the Christians' identification to "Western" way of life (dressing, religion, attitudes towards women), is called "culture" (*kulturë*) in the Devoll, a word which could also be translated by "civilization" in this context. In local discourse, the higher cultural level of Christians is due to their contacts with the foreign world through emigration and trade; "*they have seen the world*", as people say. Today, as Muslims seem to be more involved in emigration than Christians, who prefer to move to Albanian cities rather than to Greece, the situation is opposite. It is a fact that, in the Devoll alone, emigration towards Greece seems to be more a Muslim than a Christian phenomenon. First of all, when the borders opened, Christians seem to have reactivated the old American network, which allowed them to migrate in a safe way to a very attractive country (this is also true, though on a lesser scale, of Muslims who had family in America — USA or Argentina — and Australia). They also tended to consider it better to be a rich and influent trader in an Albanian city

rather than a second-class worker in Greece. That is why many of them, after having raised funding in Greece as migrants in the first two or three years, settled back in Bilisht, Korçë or Tiranë as traders, usually taking advantage of the links they had formed in Greece. For instance, Kujtim, a Christian from Bilisht, came back after two years in Greece, working in an orchard, bringing to Albania an old lorry his Greek boss had sold him. He now imports fruit and vegetables from Northern Greece to Korçë. Second, though they are Orthodox, the Devoll's Christians insist on the fact they are Albanian and not Greek, and they regularly accuse Greeks to consider them as Greeks (or Northern Epirotes). This does not mean there is no sympathy at all with the Greeks, but rather a fear of becoming an "ethnic" minority in a largely Muslim area: the Albanian Christians intend to remain Albanian, as long as they live in an Albanian district. As one of them complains: *"At the time of the cooperative, the Muslims used to insult us as « Greeks of the devil », but when the border opened they all went to Greece, while we Christians stayed in Albania. Who's Greek in this story?"* If it might be a good strategy for Albanians to claim Greek national and religious backgrounds, it is less so in a border area, where the proximity of the borderline helps to maintain a strong feeling of difference between Albanians and Greeks, especially when they share the same religion.

From the Muslim point of view, the present period of emigration is thus seen as a kind of revenge over the Christians: contact with the West and its civilization is not anymore a privilege of the Christians; Muslims too have now an access to modernity. Where as from the Christian point of view, Muslims are seen as traitors who leave their country and their religion when the country is faced with difficulties.

A second comparison is made by local people on emigration. Before and during the invasion of Greece by Italy, at the beginning of the forties, the economic situation in the Greek villages was worse than it was in the Albanian villages of Devoll. As long as the border was open, many Greeks would cross over to the Albanian villages and beg for food and work. In 1991 and 1992, when Albanians began to cross the border, begging for food, clothes and work, some of them were welcomed by Greek families who remembered their own situation during the war. To face the humiliation of being dependant on Greeks for food and clothing, many Albanians pretend that it is just reciprocity and they blame the Greeks who do not act good to them by saying: *"those Greeks, they feel superior to us because we need them to survive, but you should have seen them in the past, when they were begging for bread!"*

As can be seen from the spatial and temporal conceptions linked with emigration, the self, the human being is transformed by the crossing of the border. Muslim migrants usually change their names for Christian names as soon as they enter Greece. Some of them pretend to be of another religion (Christian instead of Muslim) or of another nationality (Vorio Epirote instead of Albanian). Family and relatives, who count for a great part in the definition of the self, have to be left in Albania. While an Albanian can always rely on his relatives to support him and avoid him any humiliation and social judgements, migrants in Greece are alone and have to manage for everything by themselves. National pride has also to be forgotten, as Albanians in Greece are often considered as second class workers and hardly as human beings. As one of them complains: *"We always live in fear and danger. We have to sleep in the woods, just like wild animals."*

As a result of these personal changes, emigration also generates new discourses on society and national identity. For example, there is a strong emphasis on family and kinship relationships which tend to consider the family as one of the bases of national identity. The Albanians, both migrants and non migrants, insist on the fact that family solidarity is much more developed among them than anywhere else, especially more than in Greece. Everyone can tell a story about Greek parents and grand-parents left by their children or send to an asylum where they are left to die alone. In contrast, they say, such things never happen in Albania. People are poor, and their only wealth is their family; they have to stick together to survive because nobody else will care for them. They cannot rely on society, or on the state, to keep them away from poverty: social organisations, such as cooperatives, which used to offer work and services to the whole village do not exist any more and have not been replaced yet. Traditional social groups, such as religious communities, have also been destroyed and, as they reappear today, they are not ready yet to offer all their members opportunities of socialisation. Family is thus seen as the only strong basis of society.

This tendency is somehow encouraged by the state and political parties, and gives family a religious or sacred dimension. "Fatherland begins at home" (*atdheu fillon tek shtëpia jote*), said the Republican party in the 1996 electoral campaign, as if the country has to be reconstructed around the last piece of national identity left by the communist regime and transition phase: family.

There would be much more to say about the use of kinship and family in today's Albania but, as far as emigration is concerned, two points can be noticed here. First, the discourse on family organisation is based on the opposition between an imagined Albanian family, on the one hand, and an imagined Greek or Western family, on the other. This opposition is mainly expressed in terms of solidarity and love, as opposed to individualism and distance. Even if the disintegration of family in the near future is sometimes feared as a consequence of the modernisation of Albania, people more usually consider that their family is the only place where Albanian identity can be preserved.

Second, that same discourse on Albanian family is rarely experienced in reality, as many families are dispersed by emigration, either inside or outside Albania. Familial solidarity does not function as it is said to function. It acts mainly in people's mind, as a response to social disintegration. It is frequent to hear people say that, "*in the past, familial solidarity was even stronger than it is today, and it would extend to a man's distant cousins*". Today, solidarity is usually limited to rather small nuclear families. A man leaves for Greece while his parents and his wife stay at home to care for the children, the garden and the animals. When he is back, the money he has earned is spent on a strict domestic basis: it is used to repair the house or build a new one, to buy food in winter time. In that way, familial relationships are as much shaped by emigration than by traditional models. The importance of family is thus felt by people because emigration tends to weaken more traditional forms of kinship relationships. In other words, emigration often contributes to question cultural and social behaviour.

Family is not the only part of society to be questioned. As mentioned above, emigration brings to Albania many new behaviours which question unconscious as well as conscious tradition. These have to do with money and wealth, with the relationships between parents and children, or between men and women. In general, all these are expressed in terms of “good” and “bad”. Among the new behaviours, some are seen as “good” ones (for example private enterprises are generally seen as a good thing), while others are seen as “bad” things (for example, spending one’s money to buy a car when agricultural material would be more necessary).

It is interesting to notice that in this religiously mixed area, where Christians are a minority, many of these social changes tend to be organised around a religious opposition. First, emigration gives meaning and value to the already existing religious opposition between Muslims and Christians. It is commonly assumed by people that, since Greece is a Christian country, Albanians who want to find jobs should be Christians or at least pretend to be Christians. It thus gives rise to a religious differentiation inside Albania, between Christians who seem to be privileged, and Muslims whose religious identity has to be questioned. Second, many innovations tend to be associated with the Christian minority, as if this minority was acting as a carrier of modernity. For example, Muslims who want to look modern keep their shoes on as they enter their house, as Christians do; they also prefer Christian plum *raki* to Muslim grape *raki*, and so on.

To be Christian or Muslim, to act as a Christian or a Muslim, is thus very important in the construction of the self. It should be remembered that this fact is in contradiction with the state’s official position on religion. While in national conceptions one is supposed to be Albanian before being Christian or Muslim, on the local level it seems that one has to be Christian or Muslim in order to be Albanian. Emigration to a Christian country seems to reactivate the already existing opposition between local Albanian Christians and Muslims, and to give it a new relevance in the definition of the self.

The representations of space, time and self are influenced by the fact that the Devoll is a border area: it creates a specific sense of identity, made of distance from the centre of the state and community with the other side of the border.

But this does not mean that the Albanian state does not exist any more in that area, or that the border has already changed and people consider themselves to be Greek. All seasonal migrants from Albania live in two states, according to the time of the year. This phenomenon is more emphasized in the border area where people live in two different states all along the year. Border people are much aware of what the Greek authorities decide relating to their status in Greece and to the border formalities. They have Greek friends and visit them; they take part in Greek religious feasts. They are looking for a form of integration inside Greek society, for example by bringing their family with them. Their children go to Greek schools, and their results in Greek history or language is a source of pride not only for their parents but also for the rest of the family in Albania. A Muslim woman from a border village was proud to tell me that her brother had been in Greece for such a long time that he found it difficult to speak Albanian. His children, she

said, were first at the Greek school. It is interesting to notice that the Albanian state has started to react to this “hellenisation” of Albanian migrants: in March 1998, a Greek delegation was asked by the Albanian parliament to respect the right of Albanians for education in their language when they live in Greece. “*Albania has always respected the rights to education of its Greek minority*, declared the Albanian part. *Greece should act the same. There are 30 000 ethnic Albanians around Kastoria and Florina [Northern Greece] and between 250 000 and 300 000 Albanian migrants live in Greece*” (Rilindja, 31.03.98). The two parts agreed on meeting every three months to discuss economic and political cooperation between the two states. In this kind of negotiations, it should also be noticed that the Albanian migrants are always compared to the Greek minority in Albania, which is a way of saying that, if they still belong to the Albanian nation, they also belong to the Greek state: they have come to form a new Albanian minority in Greece (the old one, the Arvanites, dating back to the 15th century, being now fully assimilated in the Greek nation-state). The ones who have brought their family to Greece do not intend to leave the country but rather to settle and look for complete regularisation through Greek citizenship. The decision taken in 1997 by the Greek authorities to regularise many of the illegal migrants (Albanian and others) goes in the same direction: Albanians are not anymore refugees that should be helped and send back to their country.

The search for integration within Greece includes also official cooperation between the local communities on both sides of the border. The district of Devoll has thus started to establish regular cooperation with its Greek neighbour of Kozani. This cooperation includes cross border tourist projects (originating from the Greek side, more aware of some modern trends in tourism — trekking, green and cultural tourism), border crossing agreement which would allow border people (within 20 km from the border) to cross freely, as well as material assistance in education and agriculture. All these projects are however very dependant on the general situation in Albania, and each crisis (winter 1996-1997, September 1998) seem to slow them down as insecurity on the Albanian side grows up. On the Greek part, local officials also complain of not being allowed to carry negotiations as they want to, due to the centralisation of the state: the border crossing agreement for instance, in project for one and a half year, still waits for the Greek parliament’s vote.

Since they keep an eye on both sides of the border, border people are prompt to criticize and to react to what is happening in one or the other of the two states. They also feel easily abandoned by their own state, as long as they feel attracted by the other state (the situation is probably different on the northern border, where Yugoslavia is not attractive to Albanians). In that meaning, the state is contested here as in other parts of Albania because it is not present enough: the state should care for the roads and schools, for the water and electricity supply, for security and employment, but people complain because nothing is done. On the other hand, border people probably feel better than the others the need for the state: they exist as nation, society, culture and as individuals as long as the state maintains its presence at the border.

But the state is not the only institution to be questioned by border people. Nation, religion, culture and, in one word, identity are continuously questioned and modified by border communities. As seen above, border people can pretend to be Greek, not only to find a job in Greece, but also to mark their difference with northern Albanians. They are also bringing home cultural models and behaviours from Greece, to mark their new social status inside Albania. This does not mean they can easily cross the boundaries of national identities, as Albanian society seems to have its own protections. Here is an example: an old Muslim from the village of Sinicë arrived one day in the village of Miras, to meet the mayor. One of the communal workers, who regularly goes to Greece, explains him where and when he can meet the mayor. He ends his explanation by asking the old man, in Greek: *endaksi?* (all right?), as it is usual among the migrants to use Greek words in the conversation. But the old man reacted with violence to this word: “*What is this endaksi, he said, can’t you say mirë? You are Albanian, you are not Greek! The Greeks destroyed our villages, they killed the Muslims! Never forget it!*” The old man came from a village which was burnt by the Greeks during the first world war, as many other Muslim villages of the area. In the Devoll, where the national and state borders approximately coincide with a religious boundary between Muslims and Orthodox, it is not so easy to cross the national boundary, even if it is only by using Greek words.

Conclusion

The influence of Greek culture and economy in Albania is now a general phenomenon, at least in Southern Albania, since Albanian migrants who come and go between Greece and Albania come from almost all parts of the country. But it gets most obvious in border areas, where it started earlier and in a more intensive manner. The observation of international borders is also of interest to the anthropologist. Because it deals with people involved in different states, cultures and identities, it helps to question the anthropological concepts of ‘society’, ‘space’ or ‘culture’, which are usually taken for granted by the anthropologist as the ‘natural’ boundaries of the communities he studies. International borders remind us that every society or culture has to be constructed by its members, and that this is done as much at the periphery as at the centre of the so-called ‘society’.

Both practices and representations of emigration in this border area appear to be embedded in a much wider context. Emigration is not only an economical necessity, nor a “natural” trend of Albanians, even if the present day migration phase reminds of earlier migrations. Being migrant or refugee (in the specific meaning, not the Albanian one) implies the crossing of borders and a new definition of the self. The borders the migrants have to cross are not only international borders separating different states; they are also the borders of collective identities and as such connect emigration to several oppositions and symbolic systems which question the national, religious and personal dimensions of one’s identity: north and south, Muslim and Christian, civilization and barbarity, past and present.